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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 28 March 1983

THE SELF

In the Diamond Sutra there are four types of characteristics or marks which are mentioned: the characteristic of no self, the characteristic of no others, the characteristic of no sentient beings, and the characteristic of no life. Actually, all four are talking about the same thing, i.e. the self. What is meant here by the self is that which is mine and that which is not mine but which I desire to obtain. Except for that which we have but wish to get rid of, and that which we do not have but wish to obtain, there is nothing which can be termed self. However, most of the time we are probably not aware that we desire to get rid of or obtain something. We only have an awareness of our self-existence. First of all we are aware of our body and its needs. Because our body requires certain things we feel that the self is in need of something. The body brings attention to the self. Secondly, the activities of the mind give us a sense of existence. Outside of the body and the mind there is no sense of self.

Actually it is the mind which experiences the existence of the self. What, then, is the mind? It is the non-stop, continuous flow of thoughts.

Through religious cultivation, one can come to the point where he realizes that the self he normally experiences is really an unsubstantial thing. The subjective self is originally non-existent; it exists only in the sense of body, the body's needs, and the constant flow of thoughts. This is the characteristic of no self mentioned in the Diamond Sutra.

As for the characteristic of no others, others exist only through the sense of self projecting the existence of other beings. We experience ourselves in opposition to others due to our own sense of self. Therefore, from the standpoint of the Diamond Sutra, if there is no self there are also no others. If I myself am not there then of course others likewise do not exist. It is only because of our relations with others--the benefits they give us, the losses they bring to us, etc.--that we sense our own existence.

We know that there are four billion people in the world, but the number that

we are personally acquainted with are very few. The only people whose existence we deeply experience are those who are connected to us in terms of gain or loss. The rest of the four billion people on the planet we barely know exist; whether they are there or not doesn't really affect us that much. Others only exist in terms of their relationship with us, and when the self does not exist these others also no longer exist.

The third characteristic, no sentient beings, includes the non-existence of all that which may not necessarily be related to us personally, but are still living in the world with us. Those whose practice has already reached a very high stage have already solved their own problems and dilemmas; they naturally feel great compassion for all sentient beings. They go from having solved their own problems to taking on the problems of sentient beings. The problems of sentient beings become their own.

Yet from the point of view of the Diamond Sutra, if self does not exist then neither do sentient beings. The Buddha has said that even after having saved all sentient beings, there are actually no sentient beings which have been saved. Sentient beings have been saved but one doesn't feel that he has saved them. If there was a feeling of saving sentient beings and there are sentient beings that can be saved, then there is still the existence of a self.

The fourth characteristic is no life. This is looking at the existence of self from the point of view of time. This characteristic of life refers to the previously mentioned characteristics of self, others and sentient beings. If there is no self, then the length of one's life is not important at all. But all sentient beings are attached to life; they hope to live long and avoid an early death. Because of this they seek to maintain a sense of security about their lives. They desire security now and for the future and thus try to protect or insulate their lives in every possible way. However, for those who have no self, whether they die tomorrow or in ten thousand years is of no difference to them. When one has attained the experience of no self all these problems are settled.

To sum up, concerning the characteristic of no self, the self refers to one's own existence. In the characteristic of no others, others refer to those who we are in opposition to or in contact with. The characteristic of no sentient beings refers not only to non-existence of self but also to the non-existence of all sentient beings throughout the universe. Finally, the fourth characteristic, no life, describes the process of going from desire for a long life to not worrying about the length of one's life and, in fact, not worrying about time at all.

There is a story about these four characteristics. I once heard a Dharma Master giving a talk on these same four points. At the end of the talk he asked the people in the audience if they were able to understand and put into practice what he had talked about in the lecture. Some people said yes, and some didn't understand anything at all. The Dharma Master then said, "I know that all of you can put into practice and understand the four characteristics." He said that normally when a person is eating something very delicious he has no sense of others at that moment. Otherwise he

would share the food with them. When there is a lot of work to be done, at this time there is no self. Because without a self, there is no one who needs to work. When there is a disaster and a lot of people need to be helped or saved, during this time there are no sentient beings. Otherwise one would be very busy saving sentient beings. When one is intent upon obtaining a lot of money that one doesn't really need then at this time there is no life. This is because at these times life doesn't really matter; it's the money that's important.

Speaking in this way, it seems as though sentient beings are all very selfish. This is because the four characteristics are not empty in these cases, there is still a strong sense of self in them. It takes practice before one can realize the true characteristic of no self as well as the other three characteristics.

NEWS ITEMS

Classes have been started in Chinese vegetarian cooking, calligraphy and painting, and Chinese language. For those interested it is still not too late to sign up. For further information contact the Center.

The next one-day sitting will be held 8:00 p.m. Friday, April 1 - 9:00 p.m. Saturday, April 2. There is a fee of ten dollars.

1:00 p.m. Sunday, April 10th there will be a lecture at the Ch'an Center given by Prof. Chün-fang Yü on Chinese Buddhism and Contemporary Human Problems.

Shih-fu will be returning to the Ch'an Center on April 28. There will be retreats held May 27 - June 3, and July 1 - July 8.

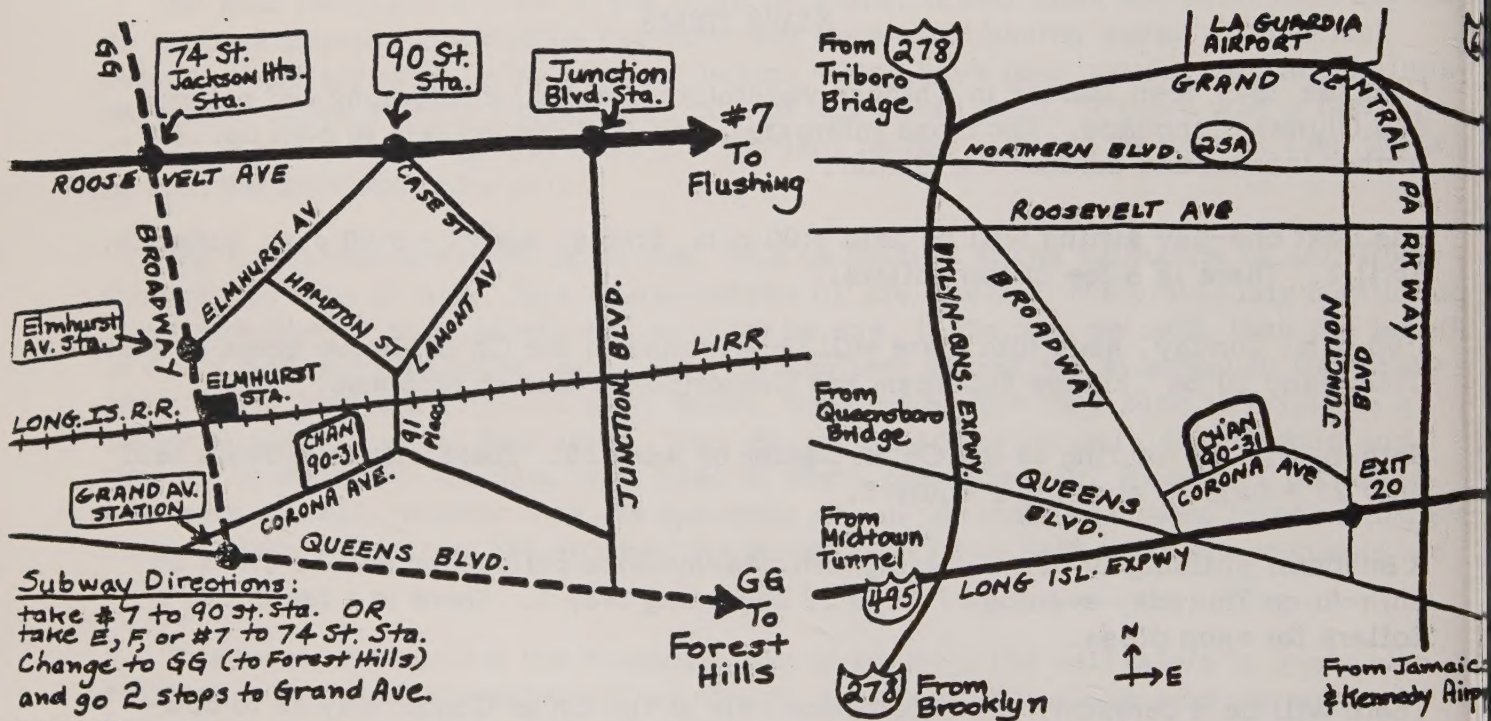
A Buddhist philosophy class dealing with Madhyamika philosophy will be given by Shih-fu on Thursday evenings 7:30-9:30 beginning May 5. There is a fee of ten dollars for each class.

There will be a ceremony and celebration held at the Ch'an Center May 22 to commemorate the Buddha's birthday as well as the third anniversary of the opening of our present Center.

From March 2nd to 7th Shih-fu travelled to southern Taiwan where he lectured to audiences altogether numbering 3,000 in the two main cities of Kaohsiung and Tainan. The tour was very successful. Presently he is teaching three courses (four hours each course per week) at Chinese Culture University in both the Graduate Dept. of Philosophy (Sui/T'ang dynasty Hwa-Yen studies) and the Institute of Buddhist Studies (Ch'an Studies and Comparative Religion).

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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